

African Openbill *Anastomus lamelligerus* breeding in Benin—the only colony known at present in West Africa?

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Une colonie nicheuse de Bec-ouvert africain *Anastomus lamelligerus* au Bénin—la seule connue actuellement en Afrique de l'Ouest? Une colonie nicheuse de Bec-ouvert africain *Anastomus lamelligerus* a été découverte sur la côte du Bénin en 2015. Il s'agit apparemment de la seule colonie connue actuellement en Afrique occidentale, d'une espèce considérée comme vulnérable dans la région.

On 7 October 2015 we visited a site in south-western Benin where local people informed us there were breeding and roosting waterbirds. This is a small island of mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*) in the Mono River, just a few km west of the estuary at Bouche du Roy; it is at 06°17'N 01°53'E, near Avlo primary school. The island is c.280 × 90 m and supports, in addition to nests of African Openbills *Anastomus lamelligerus*, substantial numbers of breeding Long-tailed Cormorants *Microcarbo africanus* and Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, as well as smaller numbers of Intermediate Egrets *Ardea intermedia*, Black Egrets *Egretta ardesiaca* and Western Reef Egrets *E. gularis*. Our guide told us that the colony had been established a few years earlier, but that this was the first time he had seen the storks there.

We visited the colony again on 31 October, when the accompanying photographs were taken (Figs. 1–2). Of five nests directly visible from the Avlo shore, one still contained eggs (brooded continuously), three had small to medium-sized chicks and one had four nearly-fledged young. Chicks were continuously sheltered by one standing adult, and it was impossible to count them except in one nest (where there was only one chick). In the two hours of observation, just two of the five adults present at those nests were relieved by their mate; during the same period at least 12 adults came to relieve their mates at nests hidden in the centre of the island. This suggests that the total number of nests could be at least 25–30. In addition to food regurgitated by the adults, one was seen carrying a mollusc and another a large red crab.



Figures 1–2. Adult African Openbills *Anastomus lamelligerus* with nestlings of different ages at a mixed-species colony near Avlo, Benin, 31 October 2015 (Robert J. Dowsett)

Bec-ouverts africains *Anastomus lamelligerus* adultes avec jeunes d'âges différents dans une colonie mixte près de Avlo, Bénin, 31 octobre 2015 (Robert J. Dowsett)

The conservation status of this species is considered to be Least Concern globally (BirdLife International 2015), but in West Africa there is considerable cause for concern. Breeding colonies have not been recorded in the Inner Niger delta, previously the only regular area, since the 1980s (Wymenga *et al.* 2002, Zwarts *et al.* 2009; J. van der Kamp & L. Zwarts *in litt.* to R. Demey 2016). The last nests reported there were 36 in February 1987 at Dentaka, Mali (c.15°12'N 04°11'W), where they were susceptible to disturbance by goat herders collecting wood (Skinner *et al.* 1987). There has only ever been one record in northern Nigeria, reported by Elgood *et al.* (1994) as 'well grown young in nest' in January in the Potiskum area; more accurately, there were nearly-fledged young on several nests within a mixed-species heronry near Maburtata (11°47'N 10°43'E), on 1 January 1960 (Elgood *et al.* 1973). Further east there were just two small colonies of a dozen pairs at the mare d'Agan, Chad (13°32'N 22°12'E), on 7 September 1964 (Salvan 1967). Recent instability in the Lake Chad basin as a result of Boko Haram terrorists augers ill for any surviving population there. There has apparently been no previous evidence of breeding in coastal West Africa: the only claim seems to have been that of Field (1978) who considered that it nested in Sierra Leone, but admitted he did not know where.

Birds are now found in West Africa, other than as vagrants, in just a very few areas (e.g. Ghana: Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2014: 222). In recent years there have been sightings during most months in coastal Togo and southern Benin, occasionally as many as 100+ together: c.100 were seen on 25 October 2009 and c.200 on 14 March 2010 in the Plaine du Sô in south-eastern Bénin (*Bull. ABC* 17: 240), while at least 245 passed in groups along the Zio River north of Lomé, Togo, on 18 October 2009 (*Bull. ABC* 17: 251). It is to be hoped that if there are any other extant colonies in West Africa that they will be documented and protection measures implemented. The Avlo Island features in a package offered to eco-tourists visiting the estuary of the Mono River, as the roost in particular, with thousands of birds converging

on the island in the evening, is a spectacular sight. Encouraged by this potential, local people decided to give protection status to the island in 2011, assisted by the NGO Eco-Bénin, and a deity (voodoo) was placed on the island. Since then, protection has been effective and nesting attempts successful; previously, roosting and nesting birds were disturbed and hunted at various sites in the area.

Acknowledgements

For helpful comments on the submitted manuscript, we thank Ron Demey, Jan van der Kamp and Leo Zwarts.

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Received 13 January 2016; revision accepted 16 February 2016.